

VZCZCXRO0750
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHLB #0084/01 0201447
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 201447Z JAN 09
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4026
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 3362
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3569
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000084

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO AND NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL, RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER/GERMAIN
NSC FOR MCDERMOTT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/18/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MARCH 14 OUTLINES ROAD MAP TO ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) With parliamentary elections a little over four months away, the March 14 Secretariat has outlined a three step "road map" focusing on increased activity by the Secretariat to coordinate the coalition's activities and messages, a second political convention to announce March 14's political program and unified electoral list, and, finally, the campaign itself. In stark contrast to the March 2008 convention, the Secretariat has decided to drop its attacks against Hizballah as the leitmotif for its political program and is instead focusing on a peaceful vision for Lebanon, not excluding the possibility of eventual talks with Israel. While internal differences over which candidates to run continue to plague the coalition, March 14 contacts assure us that these will be resolved and that there will be a unified list. Key to March 14's success is the implicit support of President Michel Sleiman and strong explicit support of moderate Arab countries Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Perceived pro-opposition biases in the LAF and media remain the coalition's biggest challenges to campaigning on a level playing field. End summary.

12. (C) On January 16, March 14 Secretariat SYG Fares Souaid shared with Pol/Econ Chief the coalition's three step "road map" to the June 7 parliamentary elections. First, the Secretariat is stepping up its activities to forge a common ground for the coalition, issuing weekly statements on March 14 positions, coordinating between party, youth, and union leaders, as well as the press, overseeing committees charged with facilitating the expatriate vote, media, security, and other issues, and preparing a political paper outlining the coalition's vision for Lebanon to be presented at the second March 14 convention.

13. (C) Second, March 14 plans to hold a convention on either February 14, the fourth anniversary of the assassination of former PM Rafiq Hariri, or March 14, but is waiting for Saad Hariri, just returned from several weeks outside of Lebanon, to decide. (Note: Ambassador will meet with Hariri January 121. End note.) In addition to presenting its political program, March 14 also plans to announce its unified electoral list and the formation of a national council, whose purpose is to provide a role for March 14 members not on the

electoral list.

14. (C) The third step is the electoral campaign itself, focusing on four key issues: security, media, electoral machines, and campaign financing. While each party in the coalition has its own independent electoral machine, the Secretariat's role is to coordinate efforts, especially on issues that concern all of the parties, such as security, financing, media coverage and messaging. Pointing to Zgharta MP Nayla Mouawad's efforts to secure Saudi financing directly, Souaid said the coalition needed to funnel its support through one source, preferably the Hariri family, to consolidate its campaign financing.

GIVE PEACE (WITH ISRAEL?)
A CHANCE

15. (C) Souaid said the political paper the Secretariat is preparing presents March 14's vision for a peaceful Lebanon, both internally and with its neighbors. He will share the document with civil society and March 14 leaders for their endorsement prior to the convention. Although he admitted that the time was not ripe, especially in wake of the Gaza conflict, to openly advocate negotiations with Israel, Souaid criticized PM Siniora's mantra that Lebanon would be the last Arab country to sign a peace treaty with its southern neighbor. Citing Druze leader Walid Jumblatt's conviction that Syrian-Israeli negotiations would absorb all of Washington's attention, leaving Lebanon on the margins unless it also engaged in peace talks with Israel, Souaid said the

BEIRUT 00000084 002 OF 004

Secretariat had made this argument to PM Siniora, President Sleiman, and others.

UNIFIED LIST POSSIBLE

16. (C) Souaid was confident the various March 14 parties would be able to resolve their differences over candidate selection. In a separate meeting with Charge and Pol/Econ Chief on January 2, Ghattas Khoury, advisor to majority leader Saad Hariri, claimed the coalition had reached agreement on 95 out of the total 128 seats. Upon his return to Lebanon, Saad (who had traveled to Saudi Arabia and France) plans to sit down with party leaders and independents to work out the remaining seats. Khoury complained, however, that "some" parties wanted to impose their own candidates in certain districts, despite the fact that these candidates were often weak, a thinly veiled criticism of Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea. Souaid, however, agreed with Pol/Econ Chief that March 14's strategy should be to nominate candidates with the best prospects for electoral victory, rather than catering to individual party demands.

17. (C) Souaid confirmed that March 14 would not name names for all 128 seats, leaving room for independent candidates. He repeated his confidence that President Sleiman would play a key role with independents in the Mount Lebanon districts. Souaid said Sleiman feared that if the opposition won a simple majority, Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun would use it to challenge Sleiman's election to the presidency. As a result, Souaid was optimistic that Sleiman would lean towards March 14. March 14 also had a "gentleman's agreement" with Sleiman, by which March 14 will refrain from openly criticizing the President or putting him in an uncomfortable position vis-a-vis Hizballah.

BIGGEST OBSTACLES:
LACK OF MEDIA ACCESS,
BIASED SECURITY APPARATUS

18. (C) Souaid cited lack of media access and a what he considers to be a pro-opposition bias within the Lebanese

Armed Forces (LAF) as the biggest obstacles facing March 14. The ongoing legal dispute between Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea and Pierre Daher, Chairman of LBC television, the only Christian alternative network to Aoun's OTV, was causing LBC to take an anti-March 14 slant, he complained. (Druze leader Walid Jumblatt expressed the same concern to us on January 14, suggesting that Geagea should hold off on pursuing the dispute with Daher until after the election). Seventy percent of the Lebanese tuned in to LBC for the news headlines, Souaid claimed, and it was critical that the first 10 minutes provide March 14 with positive coverage.

¶9. (C) In a January 15 meeting with Pol/Econ Chief, Geagea advisor Elie Khoury rejected the assertion that Geagea's lawsuit was hurting March 14, insisting that any bias against the coalition was due to the influence of LBC's largest shareholder, Saudi Walid bin Talal, and that the Saudis needed to weigh in. Khoury further claimed that Daher was using the elections to pressure Geagea into a settlement. Souaid said Saudi Ambassador Abdel Aziz Khoja was working to resolve the dispute. Souaid also said Saad had promised to find a solution to either the LBC issue, or to LF's efforts to revive MTV, owned by Gabriel Murr.

¶10. (C) As for security, Souaid warned that key positions within the LAF were controlled by the opposition. A survey the Secretariat prepared in November claimed that out of 207 officers, only 24 are pro-March 14, while 16 are "moderate" and 167 pro-opposition (primarily pro-FPM, Michel Aoun). Furthermore, out of the 15 G-2 intelligence centers, nine were led officers sympathetic to the opposition, two by officers close to President Sleiman, and only one pro-March 14, and the opposition also headed four out of five military police platoons. Souaid also said it was not clear whether Defense Minister Elias Murr would use the LAF to help or hinder March 14. The U.S. and other countries should continue to pressure Murr by increasing their support for the

BEIRUT 00000084 003 OF 004

Lebanese Armed Forces, he stressed.

¶11. (C) To address this issue, Souaid said the Secretariat was considering appointing former LAF G-2 Johnny Abdo (please protect), currently living in Paris, to focus on security issues to ensure the neutrality of the armed forces. Admitting that March 14 were not enthusiastic about this choice, he nevertheless argued that Abdo was well-connected politically, and had both the technical expertise and political savvy to play this role.

ENGAGING THE LEBANESE DIASPORA

¶12. (C) Souaid confirmed that the Secretariat was working actively to encourage Lebanese abroad to return to Lebanon to vote in the elections, focusing on the most contested districts. March 14 had formed a General Secretariat in Australia, and March 14 representatives in Washington had sent a joint letter (under the signature of Dory Chamoun's National Liberal Party representative Serge Selwan) to the Secretariat asking for political and logistical support. (Note: Other March 14 contacts, including Walid Jumblatt, Nader Hariri, and Elie Khoury, also have confirmed that they are organizing efforts to bring their supporters home to vote. End note.)

HOW THE U.S. CAN HELP

¶13. (C) In addition to providing support to the LAF, Souaid asked for U.S. help in engaging moderate Arab states like Egypt and Saudi Arabia to support March 14. The U.S. also could help with President Sleiman and the Patriarch (who "is close to us now"). "If we get Sleiman," he said confidently, "we can win Jbeil, Ksaran, Metn and Baabda" -- all key swing districts where the Christian vote will play a key role.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) Defense Minister Murr and Interior Minister Ziyad Baroud continue to assure us that the LAF, ISF and other services, despite having to provide security to all polling centers on one day, are up to the task (ISF bears the primary responsibility for election day polling place security, although it is clear the LAD will play a significant role in ensuring freedom of movement and general security on June 7).

Nevertheless, March 14's fears that intimidation and obstructionist tactics on the part of pro-opposition forces will impede its efforts to get the vote out may be valid. We will continue to press both Murr and Baroud on the need for the security services to remain neutral. Meanwhile, there is little doubt that the opposition's media advantage presents a major challenge for March 14.

¶15. (C) March 14's "gentleman's agreement" with President Sleiman is, in our view, a wise move. March 14 has nothing to gain by attacking the President. Although the Secretariat and March 14 figures were adamantly opposed to holding an Arab League summit on Gaza in Qatar, which in Jumblatt's words would have been a "victory for the other camp," it declined to openly criticize Sleiman's decision to attend. The Secretariat's plan for the March 14 2009 political platform seems to us a politically savvy update of its previous platform. While the 2008 convention theme was heavily anti-Hizballah, a message that did not resonate well with moderate Shia who disliked being lumped together with Hizballah, this kinder and gentler March 14 appears to have -- finally! -- gotten the message that what Lebanese voters want most is a positive message about an end to the violence and a chance to live in peace.

¶16. (C) While we are encouraged with the Secretariat's efforts, we note that the clock is ticking for March 14 to translate its words into actions. The convention date has slipped yet again, and, once again, the coalition spent time waiting for Saad's return to Lebanon from abroad to assume the leadership role March 14 so badly needs. Furthermore, while it is looking more likely that March 14 will indeed

BEIRUT 00000084 004 OF 004

present a unified list, factional competition for seats remains a challenge. Saad and other March 14 contacts (the more dour Jumblatt being the notable exception) continue to express confidence that they will win the June 7 elections. By our assessments, however, unless March 14 chooses the best candidate for each district, regardless of party affiliation, and gets the word out quickly on what the coalition has to offer, victory is by no means guaranteed. End comment.

SISON